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Attrition – A Sign of Leadership Problems

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Universities are learning organizations of the highest level. Thus, it is essential that they retain and recruit faculty that will maintain and push the growth of the organization. Carruthers (n.d.) in addressing why attrition is an important organizational issue stated, “an American Management Association survey showed that four out of five CEOs view employee retention as a serious issue for organizational success” (p.1). Kaye and Jordan-Evans (1999) after examining countless research studies concluded “the cost of replacing key people runs between 70 percent and 200 percent of their annual salary. Hard costs can include advertising, search firms, interviewing and relocation expenses, and sign-on bonuses. And the softer, harder-to-measure costs can include time spent on interviewing, orienting, and training (and the work put on hold to do it), lost customers (due to their loyalty to the former employees), and declining morale and productivity on the part of remaining coworkers” (p.1). Yet, attrition is a problem that most universities are constantly faced with. A number of strategies have been developed; the most recent promoted strategy is mentorship. But in most instances the strategies are treating the symptom not the problem. Unless the problem becomes the focus for treatment, attrition will remain.

Investigations into reasons for faculty attrition have found that leadership is a major, if not the primary, reason for attrition. Carruthers (n.d.) stated “High employee turnover can be recognized and properly attributed to poor managerial performance, emotional intelligence and ineffective leadership” (p.1). Dobbs (2001) reported that most people decide to leave because of bad bosses. Using the data of The Saratoga Institute Dobbs (2001) and Branham (2004) found that poor supervisory behavior was the main reason people quit. In addition, Dobbs (2001), relying on a Gallup study based on queries of some 2 million workers at 700 companies, found the same results. “It’s not so much opportunities for raises or promotion through the ranks that keep employees happy. The length of an employee’s stay is determined largely by his relationship with a manager” (Dobbs, 2001, p.1). Cropsey et al (2008) on why faculty prematurely leaves medical school concluded “career/professional advancement, low salary, and chairman/departmental leadership issues are leading reasons for faculty attrition” (p.1117). Nancherla (2009) reported that one of the chief causes of high turnover is managers’ inability to lead and engage their teams. Only 47 percent of respondents agreed that their immediate supervisor was capable of offering adequate support and development for their team. Smart (1990) found institutions following a more autocratic form of governance are more likely to experience greater faculty attrition. Scenarios of Smart’s finding can be seen in institutions of higher learning where the unwillingness of senior university administers to acknowledge leadership problems also have high faculty attrition. For example, frequent leadership change in a Faculty should be a red flag signally problems. In fact, if in a span of twelve years, the Faculty leadership has had six Deans something is problematic. The normal term for a deanship is five years. It is clear that leadership is not an adjective one would use to describe what is happening in the Faculty. When the current Dean took the helm with a five-year mandate, attrition became a very obvious concern. Following her first year in the position of Dean, 7 faculty retired (some taking early retirement), 17 faculty left (including 9 faculty hired by the current Dean). A university-wide survey, during the term of the current Dean, revealed severe discontent with the administration of the Faculty and that many faculty members were considering leaving the

organization. PFS (n.d.) referring to the Accenture study results stated “employees who are planning to leave are most likely to do so for opportunities that allow them to use and develop their skills – or for opportunities in a company with strong leadership. All the signs were there that attrition within the Faculty was directly related to the leadership occurring within the Faculty. Nevertheless, the Dean’s mandate was renewed for a second five-year mandate. In the first two years of the Dean’s second term an additional 6 faculty members left the Faculty. Each of these six faculty members had been hired by the current Dean.

The cost of not acknowledging the link between attrition and leadership will work against the premise of a learning organization. As Cropsey et al (2008) noted, “Given the rising costs of faculty turnover, it seems more profitable for an institution to invest in faculty retention endeavors as opposed to more costly recruitment efforts” (p.1116). Dobbs (2001) proposes “There is another obvious but effective way to encourage managers to reduce turnover: Tie their compensation to it. Reward them with bonuses for keeping turnover low. Penalize them when attrition soars. It’s a tactic that sounds promising, but it has yet to receive widespread attention. Most managers are weary of agreeing to connect their own pay to the whims of others” (p.2). To follow Dobbs’s (2001) proposal would mean Deans of universities would have to put their efforts into developing the human potential as opposed to promoting their ability to increase the bottom line at all costs. This is reinforced by PFS (n.d.) when they noted strategies to reduce attrition – “too often [managers are] rewarded solely on their technical skills and financial results (p.3)” and “marginal performers in management must be weeded out (p.4)”.

As noted by Branham (2004) and Desikamani (n.d.), leaders have to understand that they are there to serve employees’ needs not the other way around. It would mean redirecting the leadership in a Faculty to the reason why universities are learning organizations.

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